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After Genocide

Gervase Taratara CSSp and Paul Flamm CSSp

TANZANIA

Look at a map of East Africa and your eye will focus on Tanzania. Resting on top of it are Kenya and Uganda. Tucked into it to the northwest are two small countries — Rwanda and Burundi — which together measure roughly 400x200 kms. Small in size, perhaps — but larger than life to Lieutenant-General Romeo Dallaire.

The Canadian Army general received the call to serve as commander of the UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda in 1992. He believed he was heading off to Africa to help two warring parties achieve a peace both sides wanted. Instead he got caught up in civil war and genocide. Two years later — broken, disillusioned and suicidal — he flew home to Canada, believing he had become the convenient scapegoat for the failure of that UN mission. In 1998 after he returned from Tanzania, having testified at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, his mind and his body “both decided to give up.” He was given a medical discharge from the army.

The fact that 800,000 Rwandans died and millions of others were injured, displaced or made refugees in the genocide haunted him. “My story is a story of betrayal, failure, naïveté, indifference, hatred, genocide, war, inhumanity and evil.” No wonder he named his book *Shake Hands with the Devil*. “Asked if I could still believe in God I answered that I know there is a God because in Rwanda I shook hands with the devil. I have seen him. I have smelled him and I have touched him. I know the devil exists, and therefore I know there is a God.”





The uprooted victims of this war made their way south into camps in Tanzania. There two Spiritans — Gervase Taratara from Burundi and Paul Flamm from the USA — continue to minister to them.

Gervase Taratara

Gervase, himself a refugee from his native Burundi, is now the first Spiritan from that country. He attributes much of what happened in Burundi to the hierarchy of relationships placing the Tutsi (the minority) above the Hutus (the majority). The majority naturally wanted to liberate themselves from that domination. Unhealed anger and resentment burst out into open and murderous conflict.

The Tutsi-dominated army turned against the Hutus. In October-November 1993 an estimated 50,000-100,000 people were killed. About 800,000 Hutus fled the country, while 350,000 Tutsis became internally displaced.

For the past ten years as a member of Spiritan Relief Services, Gervase has been ministering to the refugees who have flocked into Tanzania from Burundi, Rwanda and Congo.

He describes the situation in the camps. "Three things became major dividing factors: 1) many people from different backgrounds suddenly came to live together in the congested and confined camps; 2) northerners needed to be in leadership that had been held by southerners; 3) tension continued between those who wanted to use force and those who upheld

diplomacy as the way of resolving the long-standing conflict that had been sparked in 1993."

Spiritan Relief Services developed peace education seminars in the camps, primarily for Christians, and invited individuals from different sides to attend. These seminars created an atmosphere of trust between individuals and groups. The Spiritans also met with Burundians who lived outside the camps, but had influence on the people in the camps. All were invited to work for unity and not for division.

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Gervase was active among the participants in the Arusha Peace Negotiation in 1998. "I asked them that while negotiating they should constantly think of those people who had died and continued to die, those who spent days and nights hiding in the valleys, and those thousands who were forced to live in exile as refugees. Later, we in Spiritan Relief Services wrote an open letter to all the negotiators which was very well received."

In addition to this socio-political work Spiritan Refugee Services has also been

involved in regular sacramental ministry, in building mutual relationships between receiving refugee communities, and in advocating for the gradual repatriation of refugees. "We visit the refugees in all the camps in Tanzania, and those internally displaced in Burundi," says Gervase. "We endeavour to be God's instruments of peace to the people of Burundi."

Paul Flamm

When Paul Flamm was a seminarian he attended a nine-month programme in refugee studies at Oxford following which he undertook a ministry to Rwandan refugees in Tanzania. These refugees were forced back to their own country in 1996.

Then came Burundian refugees, followed by hundreds of thousands from Congo overwhelming the already overstretched resources of the local church. Spiritan Relief Services did what it could. Paul, now a priest, began working with refugees in Kigoma, Tanzania.

"In many respects," writes Paul, "ministry with refugees is very similar to ministry in a parish. Babies continue to be born and baptized, couples continue to marry, youth and adults ask to be baptized, others who were separated from the church ask to return, and, sadly all too frequently, people get sick and some die. Catholic action and vocation groups are very active in the camps, so they need to be accompanied. Together with the Sunday services, the sacramental and normal pastoral ministry demands up to three quarters of our time."

Very similar to ministry in a parish — but not totally so. “When they arrived in the camps people from all regions of the country were put together so it was like starting a new parish — experienced catechists and leaders had to be identified and chosen; new catechists and leaders had to be given the opportunity to recognize and develop their gifts. Leadership is an ongoing concern in our ministry. Due to the temporary nature of our churches, church construction is also a recurring concern. In the last two years we built five new churches which we hope will last for the remainder of the refugees’ stay.”

Overcoming differences

The refugees themselves were divided politically and regionally. “So we had to help them overcome their differences,” writes Paul. “We built a sense of unity through working together on church projects, preparing celebrations and receiving visitors.”

Because the refugees are poor and oppressed, a significant part of camp ministry

Strange as it may seem, opportunities for and the quality of primary and secondary education in the camps is equal to or better than what is available in Burundi. This becomes a strong incentive for families to remain in the camps.

Many long-term refugees, who have been out of Burundi since 1972 or who were born outside Burundi, have no idea where their family land is located. So they have no place else to go.

Still others have been traumatized by direct experiences of violence. Some of the refugees themselves were responsible for crimes and human rights abuses for which they fear being punished if they return to Burundi.

“We do what we can to promote peace and reconciliation,” writes Paul. “We held a three-day youth ‘revival’ in which over

Armand Duteil (France)

In Guinea we became involved in the social life of the camps and brought about better relations with other faiths. We visited the camps regularly — fifty-five in all — to deal with liturgy and religious education, through personal contact, on-the-spot visits, and meetings of various kinds. At our community meetings we sought to reflect on the life of the refugees in the light of the Word of God, to find out how to organize the camps better, starting from the violent situations they had been through. We also focused on how best to welcome the new arrivals.

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involves advocacy on their behalf among the host country nationals. “Many people regard them as rebels and murderers, a threat to their security and to the environment, a hindrance to the economy. If it is convenient to the host government to recognize their rights, it does so. If not convenient, it routinely disregards such rights, including the fundamental right not to be forcibly returned to their country of origin if their well-being and life would be threatened.”

Returning home vs. staying put

The current population in the camps is around 60,000, down from over 100,000 in previous years. This is the result of successful elections in Burundi in 2005 and the signing of a cease-fire accord in late 2006 between the last remaining opposition group and the government of Burundi. Many refugees have returned home with some hope for the future. Others remain in the camps for a variety of reasons.

1500 of our youth participated. Our Advent retreats focus on forgiveness, peace and reconciliation. It is evident from the questions and comments of the refugees that there are still many fears and doubts about returning to Burundi.”

Understanding their experiences in the light of their faith

“The sacramental and pastoral dimension of our ministry is the door that enables us to enter the refugees’ life,” writes Paul. “The church can become a place of refuge and solace in the difficult life they face. We help them understand their experiences of war and exile in the light of their faith. We help them confront the lies and rumors, the fears and prejudices that divide them among themselves and from their brothers and sisters back home. Faith-based insights can also help the refugee community address pressing issues related to war and conflict, to peace negotiations

and to the long and difficult process of seeking truth and justice, forgiveness and reconciliation.

“This sacramental and pastoral dimension differentiates us from the aid agencies and other NGOs. It offers us the possibility of creating an intimate relationship with the refugee community based on day-to-day interactions that are free of administrative and security restrictions.

But our ministry must insist on the dignity of the refugees and the wisdom they possess. For this to happen we need the participation of the catechists, elected church leaders, and the whole church community. Nor can we, as people who are not party to the conflicts and sufferings that the refugees have experienced, expect to understand fully or appreciate the complex mix of emotions with which they must struggle. The church becomes a forum where ideas and concerns are freely exchanged.”

Few parties are innocent

“We try to walk a delicate line between solidarity with the refugees and calling them to recognize their own hand in the hostilities that led to the war and their flight. In today’s complex conflicts few parties are innocent. All parties to the war committed serious human rights violations.

In our homilies we never told anyone to take up arms or not; but we told those who chose to fight that they could not claim to be seeking justice for their people and for the nation if they robbed and raped and killed innocent citizens. If they did so, they would be ordinary criminals. Similarly, in our current efforts towards peace and reconciliation, we try to stress the need to look first into our own hearts before pointing the finger at others.” ■